

Professional Learning Communities

Using Data in Decision Making to
Improve Student Learning



Author

Patrick Baccellieri, Ed.D.

Foreword by Richard F. Elmore, Ed.D.



SHELL EDUCATION

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Professional Learning Communities: Using Data in Decision Making to Improve Student Learning grew out of a case study I conducted of South Loop Elementary School in Chicago Public Schools. This study was informed by my work as the school's principal, my former experiences as an educator, and my current work as an administrator in the district office.

This story about South Loop begins with a description of the conditions at this once high-need urban elementary school, then discusses how the school's administration and teacher teams addressed these concerns, and concludes with descriptions of some of the accomplishments and lessons learned. Ultimately, this book is about how teachers learned to work with one another and engaged in common practices within and across grade-level teams. It is designed to show how the school leadership and teacher teams worked collaboratively to implement a great deal of reform over a relatively short period of time at a school that was historically resistant to change.

Plans were developed at South Loop to address issues and concerns about the school's culture, climate, teaching, and learning. The focus of this book is on the attention brought to teaching and learning, and specifically how South Loop used standardized and formative assessments to improve student learning in literacy. The systems and structures at the core of this work were new to most of the teachers at the school. Making change in practice is never easy. This book offers the opportunity to explore the school from the inside out and the outside in. You will read teachers' recollections about their experiences—some of which involved fear, resistance, courage, support, growth, learning, pride, and accomplishment.

This book demonstrates how South Loop's use of assessments and assessment data in assessment cycles contributed to school change. This work, grounded in the use of formative assessments, engaged teacher teams in the analysis of student assessment data, including

student writing. On a regular basis, the school leadership team made time for the entire faculty and grade-level teams to analyze student work and discuss student reading, writing, and mathematics achievement data.

This cycle of assessment, data analysis, and data-driven curriculum planning and instruction influenced the quality and dynamic of the school's professional learning community, which developed strong teacher teams. This use of ongoing, schoolwide formative assessments provided a focus for the school community and became central to the work of teachers and students.

While the challenges at the school were significant, South Loop, a school that was once underperforming, made significant change. Not only did many of the students at the school improve in their ability to achieve as measured on standardized tests, but student behavior and the quality of student life at the school also improved.

Many teachers at the school experienced similar changes, resulting in improved collegiality and greater, deeper understanding about curriculum and instruction. Now, teachers at South Loop have supportive systems, structures, routines, and tools to overcome obstacles, and as a result, engage in high-quality teaching and learning.

These improvements attracted public attention, and the school has been featured a number of times in local news media as an example of school improvement. In fact, *The Chicago Tribune* referred to SLES as "the poster child" for school improvement in Chicago (Banchero November, 2005; *The Chicago Tribune* Editorial Board 2007). In October 2008, the Chicago Board of Education approved the opening of a new elementary school, South Shore Fine Arts Academy, based on the "South Loop Way." This new school will model its curriculum and administration on South Loop. To the principal at the new school, the "South Loop Way" means "collective responsibility" for student achievement (Maidenberg 2008).

After five years as the principal of South Loop, I made the decision to leave the school to work in the district's central office, where I have been working for two years. Initially I supported the work of the

curriculum offices. Currently, I work as an administrator with the focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in some of the district's most underperforming schools.

As a district administrator with Chicago Public Schools, I am very aware of our challenges. However, I know that when we work together, great things can happen. The case study of South Loop gave me the opportunity to reflect on some of the key work that took place in one school over five years and to understand the key factors that contributed to the school's success. Knowing that it takes a school community to develop a community school, I work with school principals, their schools, and neighborhood communities to dramatically improve the quality of the learning environment and teaching and learning at our schools. I know the challenges are significant and that, while it is important that there is a sense of coherence at the school, it is essential that multiple strategies be implemented in support of the desired change.

In August 2002, I remember walking into South Loop Elementary School for the first time, just two short weeks before the new school year was to begin. I had a sense of where things were and what needed to be accomplished; yet in the midst of it all, I saw the possibilities...a vibrant school community, teacher leadership, high degrees of collaboration, and most importantly, students with access and opportunities.

The story of South Loop illustrates that while the work at the school was built on a vision and mission, it took more than that to bring about changes at the school. At the core of this work was a focus on teachers—the continuous cycle of assessments, data analysis, and curriculum planning. Over time, teachers became accustomed to the structures, routines, expectations, and processes that facilitated collaboration. By themselves, these factors did not make a professional learning community. However, data shows that as these factors were implemented at South Loop, teacher use of assessments, data, and curriculum planning all increased and improved. These improvements brought about change and led to the development of a professional learning community.